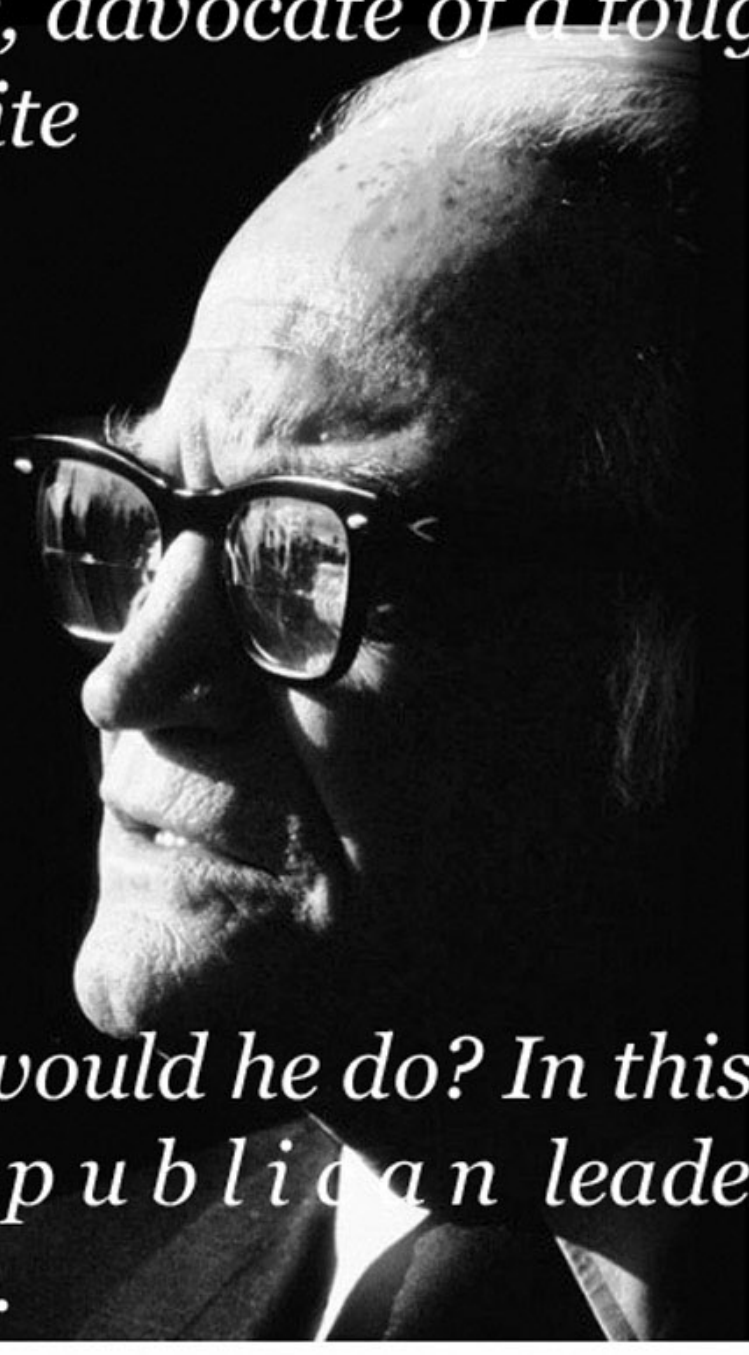
As Goldwater Sees The War In Vietnam

Barry Goldwater, advocate of a tough line, says the White House refuses to drive for victory abroad because of politics at home. If Goldwater were now President, what would he do? In this interview the Republican leader speaks his mind...



Q Mr. Goldwater, how do you size up the situation in Vietnam now?

A We are still not trying to win the war and, as a result, the war is going badly.

Q Is the war being lost?

A Well, we're not winning; we don't see daylight. Just think of the news the other day of a big battle twenty miles from Saigon. We've been fighting this war since 1961. Now, this is contrary to what McNamara [Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara] will say, but in 1961 our boys were ordered to shoot back in Vietnam, to fight.

So, for my money, we've been at war since 1961, not just for the past year. After all of this time, we're still fighting major battles just twenty miles from where we started. I think we have to admit that we're not making progress.

Q Why not? Why aren't we making progress?

A I think there are two reasons: One is the lack of a really stable government in South Vietnam. The civil disturbances over there—especially the demonstrations against us—I've looked upon as Communist-inspired, which is something we see all over

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the world. If it keeps on as a continuing civil war, then I think we're in a very bad fix. I'm not at all sure we are doing all we could be doing to insure stability in Saigon.

Now, as to the second reason why we aren't making headway: I think frankly it's because we're not making military judgments based upon military needs and military strategy. We're making judgments based upon domestic political needs.

Q Can you give an example?

A Yes. Let's just take the targets we are bombing—or, rather, the targets we are not bombing. Why don't we go after the petroleum dumps? It's true that the North Vietnamese don't use the quantity of petroleum that we do, but they run trucks, and they have an important need for it. In fact, without this petroleum they can't run their trucks. Why don't we bomb the petroleum dumps near Haiphong? I'm not talking about bombing the city itself, but the petroleum dumps.

Q Well, why don't we do it?

A We don't do it, in my opinion, because Lyndon Johnson is trying to keep both sides of the fence happy. He's trying to keep the Morse-Fulbright contingent [Democratic Senators Wayne Morse of Oregon and J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas] happy. And he's trying to satisfy those people in his own party and in the Republican Party who are supporting him—but who say we ought to do a little bit more. He's bombing—but he's not bombing. In other words, he's riding down the middle because of the domestic political situation.

I've never known the United States to be in a military situation before where the Commander in Chief, the President, has taken such an active hand in running the war, in deciding he wants to "split the difference" with sound military tactics. Even Truman didn't go that far.

Q What is the argument for not

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letting professional military men run the war in Vietnam?

A The argument that we hear is that civilian leaders tend to be more cautious about escalation. Now, here is a mysterious word to the American people. They know that escalation means "going up." But no argument is ever won, no sale is ever made, no point is ever made without escalation.

In other words, the American way, as I understand it, is you try a little bit harder than the other fellow. So, if we escalate in war, we merely use the weapons we have, and use them more effectively. It isn't the number of weapons or the types of weapons that we have that create escalation; it's the willingness to use them. We haven't shown that willingness.

Q Why is that?

A Let's be frank about it. We have an election coming up in November, and the way it looks right now, the Democrats stand to lose quite a few seats in the House, chiefly because of Vietnam and inflation.

Q The President says his polls show this isn't true—

A I don't know who takes his polls. But I get around this country and I talk to a lot of people. And I can tell the President that the people I talk to think that Vietnam is not being handled right. I don't think that Vietnam is yet the great issue that it might become, but it is a growing issue. The question of what's gone wrong in Vietnam is on everybody's mind.

Q Getting back to the fear of escalation—is it a fear that Red China might enter the war?

A Yes, and it creates a kind of Administration paralysis. It is apparently the conviction of the President's civilian advisers that if we escalate, if we do bomb supply routes, if we bomb matériel depots, electric-generating plants, etc., that Red China will come in.

It is on this point that I think

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Americans need a real thorough education on China.

The Fulbright-Morse show in the Senate brought out many people who, frankly, are timid, who wrongly feel that Red China will get into it. I don't think Red China wants any part of war. I don't think Peiping would come into this war under any circumstances.

Q Then do you think it both safe and wise to take a much tougher course in Vietnam?

A If we don't, I don't think we'll even have a stalemate. I think we'll probably be run out of South Vietnam.

Q President Johnson seems to be doing some of the tough things in Vietnam that you suggested in the 1964 campaign—

A First of all, I don't want to take pride of authorship in those suggestions. I was merely one of many people who were saying that we'd better get on with the job. Mind you, we were already fighting in South Vietnam during that 1964 campaign.

I think it is pretty generally known now that our advisers were shooting back and had been shooting back since 1961. The American people didn't know that, and the President didn't tell them that. He merely said that we had boys out there who were advising, which was true in the fifties, but not true in the sixties.

Now, I think the President is certainly doing most of the things that were suggested during the 1964 campaign, although he's not doing them, in my opinion, in the way that's going to bring an end to the war—an end that is satisfactory to our allies and to us.

Q Would you have already called up the National Guard, in light of what has happened in the past year? Is that another area where you and the President still differ?

A If the Secretary of Defense had

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told the truth about the condition of our reserves and the thinness with which we're spread in the military, I think the National Guard should have been called up.

I don't think the non-Guard reserves are ready. I think that they can be made ready. They're not ready today because the Secretary of Defense has never given them the tools to get ready with. He has talked one day as if he were a strong backer of the reserves, and the next day as if he wanted no part of it.

Now, as for the National Guard units—I speak from direct acquaintance with only the Arizona Guard—I would say some are close to combat readiness. I don't think they're ready to go tomorrow, but I think they could be ready quickly.

I think that prudence would have said, "Call up those units that are near ready for combat, and get them ready," because in spite of what the Secretary of Defense tells the American people, we are thinly spread.

I just got off an active-duty tour with the Air Force, and although I can't divulge secret figures, I can tell you that our Tactical Air Command is very, very thinly spread and could not support another sizable incident outside Vietnam. This isn't altogether due to a lack of equipment—although that exists. It's also due to serious personnel problems.

The Tactical Air Command and the ground forces are spread too thin around the world. They have not been built up as Mr. McNamara says, and I hope that the Armed Services committees of both houses keep after this, to bring out the fact that we were not ready to fight even a small war in Vietnam.

Q As for our strategy in Vietnam, what is it that you would do differently?

A All the way along now—from 1961 into 1966—we've always been reacting, rather than taking the initia-

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tive at every point. Can you ever win a war under those circumstances?

Now, the fact is, I'm an amateur and I would be listening to the professionals. There are too many amateurs at work in this work already. I can speak as a nonamateur only when you consider the air war. There, we can always take the offensive. We have air superiority, and the only way the enemy has to combat our air power is a rather limited antiaircraft system—although that's growing day by day. If we would select the targets that our military people want to hit, I think this war could be shortened, and shortened fast.

I had a letter the other day from an officer—I won't give his grade or his name—but he said, "I'm convinced that 95 per cent of the ammunition I expend is wasted." You see, we're dropping bombs—but where?

Q How far would you carry the bombing?

A It's an open secret in Washington that the Joint Chiefs of Staff want to bomb the petroleum depots around Haiphong. I certainly would back up the Joint Chiefs' argument about bombing those depots.

I would certainly close the port of Haiphong. I don't think we need to bomb it. I think we can close it by sinking light ships in its very shallow and narrow channel.

The railroad coming down from Red China certainly should be put out of commission, and the one major highway that comes through the Red River Valley should also be put out of commission. There are very few industrial targets, in my estimation, around Hanoi, but wherever there is an industrial target that's contributing to their war effort, we should bomb.

It comes down to this: We're not exerting our full air power against the enemy, and I don't think that is playing fair with the men who are being drafted and the men who are being sent over to Vietnam.

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I don't think the Administration is being fair with the American people. I don't think this country is being fair with its allies, because if this is going to be the way we're going to respond to Communist aggression around the world, I think the Communists are going to really get aggressive. We haven't shown, as a country, the determination to get this job done.

I have to say that we should be very proud of the boys we have over there. I'm told the morale is high, that they are anxious to get on with it. I've talked to young pilots who are home and want to go back and do more. They are charged up with this thing.

But they are disillusioned with the political leadership that would allow a war like this to drag and drag and drag. In other words, if you're in a war, the best way to get out of it is to win it. And the quickest way to win it is to use the power you have—and we have the power.

Q You said before the President is not listening to his military advisers because of political considerations. Could you explain that further?

A Domestically, the reason is to keep the war at a low level to save as many members of his Congress as he can. Historically, the President must expect quite a loss for the "in" party in November.

Q Whether there was a war or not?

A Whether there was a war or not. If you throw a war in, his losses could be very large. They could go—I'm conservative in this—to a loss of forty seats for the Democrats. Some of the fellows in the House think it could go well over fifty.

Then, add to the problem of war the fact that we are now in a period of inflation that can be attributed to one source only, and that is the federal government. This is coming through, I'd say, very loud and clear

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to the housewives. My wife came home the other day and just raised the devil because she had to pay fifty-nine cents for a head of lettuce. This is the first time in our thirty-two years of married life I've ever heard my wife complain about anything. This is going on all over this country.

So, you couple war with a government-induced inflation—a war that could have been stopped or have been won, and inflation that need never have been—and the blame is going to fall right where it should: on the shoulders of Lyndon Johnson.

Q You say the President's strategy —no matter what happens—is to keep this war in as low a key as possible?

A It's for political purposes. There again, as I said earlier, he's trying to satisfy both sides. He can go to the "doves" and the doves are happy because he is not escalating the war. He can go to the "hawks" and they can be made happy because he just dropped a lot of bombs out of B-52's, and we probably killed a lot of monkeys and we knocked a lot of trees down. But nobody has ever satisfactorily explained to me what we're accomplishing in those heavy raids using strategic bombers over the jungles of South Vietnam.

Q Do you find Americans generally share your concern?

A I think the American people are deeply troubled and confused in this whole problem of Asia. Most of our people don't undertand what we're fighting out there and what it involves. They can't comprehend the ability of Communism to stir up a fight in that part of the world. Nor can they understand how Communist activity there is being transmitted to our own continent through the pro-Red China groups, the "admit Red China to the United Nations" groups, the professionally directed demonstrations, speeches all over America.

Bit by bit by bit, the American mind is being affected and even undermined. Yet, the fact is that no-

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body in authority yet has taken the trouble to really tell them what's going on in Asia.

I was speaking the other day in Yuma, Arizona, where a woman asked me, "What is our policy in Vietnam?" I said, "I don't know what our policy is, but I will say that no sound military decision can ever be made unless there is a stated policy, a national policy to base it on." No general is going to take it unto himself to make up his mind as to what the national policy should be. This has to come from the President.

I have never seen or heard any policy regarding Vietnam other than: We're there because of our treaty agreements to be there; we're there because we want to fight Communist fires—but no over-all policy. I think the President should level with the American people and tell them what's going on out there.

Q In what way is the President not leveling now?

A I haven't heard him tell the American people just what we intend to do. I've heard him say we're going to stay, we're not going to get out. But I can't recall his saying we're going to win—and to me this is a very important word.

I hear Fulbright and Morse and those people say that we ought to get out of Vietnam. I hear no answer from the President. And you can't ignore these people.

Q Have you given some thought to the kind of victory you'd like to see in Vietnam?

A When you're engaged in war, there's only one victory—and that's to force the enemy to quit. Now I don't care how that's accomplished. That's a military problem, and a problem for all your best brains in economics, politics, psychology, and all of the tools of national policy that we have. I would consider that we would have a victory in Vietnam when the South Vietnamese were once again able to

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conduct a government which would not be hampered by war, terrorism or civil disturbances created by Communism.

Incidentally, I also think that, even if that type of victory comes, we're not going to be able to bring our boys home. I think we're going to be policing in that part of the world for many, many years, because this won't be Communism's last attempt.

We're going to be in Asia for some time, if we are sincere in our desire to help stop Communism over there.

Q A lot of people ask: Is that part of the world worth saving?

A Well, I think it's worth saving. I think any part of the world is worth saving, because wherever we lose to Communism—I don't care if it's a little street in Saigon—it's a loss to the United States.

I don't think that we can afford to allow Communism to win anyplace.

Coronet
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